DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 775 SO 034 501

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TITLE	Civics: What Do 8th-Graders Know, and What Can They Do?
INSTITUTION	National Center for Education Statistics (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	NCES-2001-462
PUB DATE	2001-10-00
NOTE	8p.; For related documents, see SO 034 500-502.
AVAILABLE FROM	ED Pubs, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398. Tel: 877-433-7827 (Toll Free); e-mail: edpubs@inet.ed.gov. For full text: http://www.ed.gov/ pubs/edpubs.html.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	NAEPfacts; v6 n3 Oct 2001
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizenship; Citizenship Education; *Civics; Grade 8; Junior High Schools; *Knowledge Level; Middle Schools; Performance Based Assessment; *Social Studies; *Student Evaluation; *Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*National Assessment of Educational Progress

ABSTRACT

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998 Civics Assessment measured student knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, and civic dispositions at the eighth grade level. This publication describes eighth graders performance based on 37 questions from the eighth-grade assessment. Thirty of the thirty-seven questions were multiple choice. The remaining seven were constructed response questions that required students to write their answers. The goal of the NAEP 1998 Civics Assessment was to measure how well U.S. youth are being prepared to meet their citizenship responsibilities. The framework for the 1998 Civics Assessment specifies three interrelated components which, taken together, reflect broad civic competency: knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, and civic dispositions. The questions required eighth graders to read and answer questions based on a variety of materials. The assessment was designed to evaluate student ability to recall specific information, make inferences, or perform more analytical/evaluative tasks, such as distinguishing opinion from fact or defending a position. (Author/BT)

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Civics: What Do 8th Graders Know, and What Can They Do?

National Center for Education Statistics (ED), Washington, DC.
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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

THE NATION'S REPORT CARD NAEP

NAEPFACTS

Vol. 6 No. 3 October 2001

Civics: What Do 8th-Graders Know, and What Can They Do?

Abstract: *The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998 Civics Assessment measured students' knowledge, their intellectual and participatory skills, and their civic dispositions. This issue of* NAEPfacts *describes 8th-graders' performance on 37 questions from the 8th-grade assessment.*

The goal of the NAEP 1998 Civics Assessment was to measure how well American youth are being prepared to meet their citizenship responsibilities. One way to obtain an understanding of the range of student performance is to look at individual questions on the assessment and the percentage of students who gave a correct response to those questions.

The assessment administered to grade 8 students included 151 questions. Thirty-seven of those questions, together with student performance data, scoring information, and additional data, are available at the NAEP website (**http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/**).

This issue of *NAEPfacts* arranges the 37 released questions in order of difficulty, as determined by the percentage of 8th-grade students who answered them correctly. These 37 questions provide examples of student performance but do not give a representative sample of the complete range of questions on the assessment. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is unable to release enough questions to provide a fully representative sample. Most questions must be kept confidential so that they can be reused on future assessments, permitting comparability of results for the assessments.

The framework for the 1998 civics assessment specifies three interrelated components which, taken together, reflect broad civic competency: *knowledge*; *intellectual and participatory skills*; and *civic dispositions*. Each assessment question has a knowledge and intellectual skills component. Some of the questions also measure participatory skills and/or civic dispositions.

The questions required 8th-graders to read and answer questions based on a variety of materials. The assessment was designed to evaluate students' ability to recall specific information, make inferences, or perform more analytical or evaluative tasks such as distinguishing opinion from fact or defending a position.

For example, students were asked "Which of the following documents describes the powers of the President of the United States? A) The Declaration of Independence B) The Mayflower Compact C) The Constitution D) The Articles of Confederation." Forty-eight percent recognized that "C" was the correct answer.

Frequently, students would be asked several questions on a single topic. For example, students were asked three questions about a quotation on civil disobedience from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

Thirty of the 37 questions displayed in this issue of *NAEPfacts* are multiple-choice questions with four possible answers. This means that students had one chance in four of getting these questions right, merely by guessing.

The remaining seven sample questions are "constructed-response" questions, which require students to write their answers. It is harder for students to get these questions right by guessing. Short constructed-response questions have three possible scores—"Complete," "Partial," and "Unacceptable." Extended constructed-response questions have four possible scores—"Complete," "Acceptable," "Partial," and "Unacceptable."

For purposes of this analysis, only "Complete" and "Acceptable" answers to extended constructed-response questions are reported. For short constructed-response questions, only "Complete" answers are reported.

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Note: The following chart gives summary descriptions of 37 sample questions from the NAEP 1998 Civics Assessment for the 8th grade, arranged by the percentage of students who answered them correctly, from the highest to the lowest. Multiple-choice questions are identified by an "(MC)" at the end of the question. For these questions students were choosing the "best" answer available, which was not necessarily the answer they would have given themselves. Each constructed-response question includes the full text of a student's answer that received a "Complete" score, with students' grammatical and other errors left unchanged.

100%

85 percent knew that this World War I poster was intended to get people to join the army by appealing to patriotic feelings. (MC)

81 percent recognized that, according to standards set forth by Martin Luther King, Jr., a law that requires segregation of the races is unjust. (MC)

77 percent recognized that one step the United Nations could take to prevent two nations from going to war would be to arrange for diplomatic negotiations between the two countries. (MC)

71 percent recognized that taking part in peaceful demonstrations and boycotts would be the response to an unjust law that is most consistent with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ideas. (MC)

71 percent understood that Congress has been able to expand the powers of the federal government based largely on its authority to make all laws necessary to perform its duties. (MC)

62 percent were able to use the charts in the opposite column to determine that people are most likely to volunteer for organizations that focus on community affairs. (MC)

75%

78 percent recognized that this photograph illustrates the secret ballot. (MC)

77 percent knew that the Bill of Rights mostly addresses the rights of individuals. (MC)

75 percent understood from an anecdote about Susan B. Anthony that the U.S. Constitution did not say that it was illegal for women to vote. (MC)

Chart I

In What Areas Do People Volunteer?	Percentage
Education	44%
Youth organizations	41
Health care	34
Poverty and hunger	23
Arts and culture	16
Politics	16
The environment	13

Chart II

Why Do People Volunteer?	Percentage
I want to help others	97%
I enjoy the work	93
The specific work or cause interests me	89
I feel a responsibility to volunteer	76
To make new friends	40
To get job experience	15
My employer encourages volunteering	10

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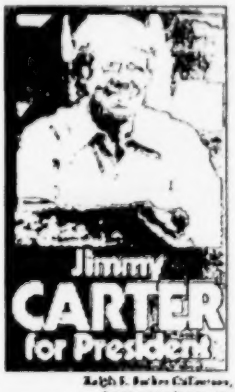
61 percent recognized that this cartoonist would be likely to support strengthening the World Court's ability to resolve conflicts. (MC)

60 percent understood that Richard Nixon's poster emphasizes his political experience, while Jimmy Carter's poster portrays him as a political outsider. (MC)



52 percent recognized that if the places of worship in Town X join together to provide food and shelter for the homeless, this is an example of civil society rather than government. (MC)

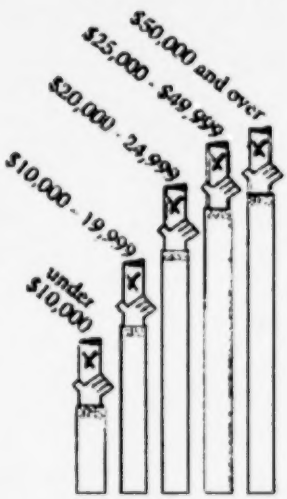
51 percent understood that the story of Susan B. Anthony's attempt to register to votes is an example of people peacefully protesting against a law they believe is wrong. (MC)

48 percent knew that the Constitution describes the powers of the President of the United States. (MC)

50%

REPORTED VOTER TURNOUT BY AVERAGE INCOME, 1992

(as a percentage of voting-age population)



59 percent understood this graph to show that the higher someone's income is, the more likely he or she is to vote. (MC)

58 percent recognized that someone convicted of stealing a candy bar and sentenced to 50 years in prison might challenge the sentence by citing the Eighth Amendment. (MC)

58 percent understood that according to the Bill of Rights, the fact that only some rights are listed does not mean that the people have no others. (MC)

52 percent knew that because of the Fourth Amendment there are legal limits to the power of the police to enter your home. (MC)

50 percent understood that Congress can pass a bill even if the President disagrees with the bill because Congress is the primary legislative power of the government. (MC)

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46 percent understood the meaning of this cartoon to be that before the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment state governments did not have to follow the Bill of Rights. (MC)

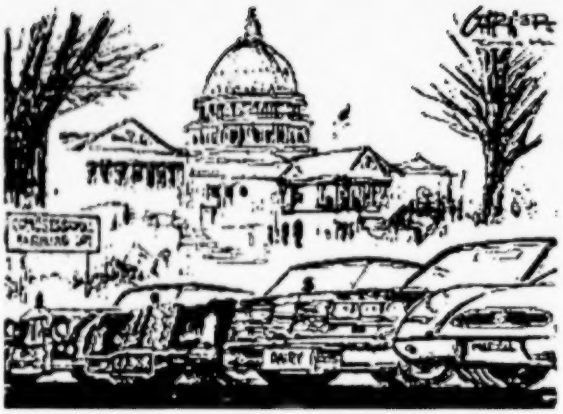
42 percent recognized that a statement by Chief Justice Earl Warren on the power of the Supreme Court to determine the meaning of a law describes the Court's function of judicial review. (MC)

35 percent knew that the number of electoral votes allotted to each state is based on its representation in Congress. (MC)

32 percent knew that the Fourteenth Amendment was designed to protect former slaves. (MC)

31 percent received either "Complete" (13 percent) or "Acceptable" (18 percent) scores when asked to choose three areas of volunteer activity, identify for each one a specific action individuals could take outside their homes, and explain how it would make a difference in their own community. A student receiving a "Complete" score wrote "1) The environment: People can get together and pick-up trash along side a road or lake. This would help the environment by keeping animals from getting hurt by the trash. 2) Youth organizations: People could form groups and have after school activities until about when parents get home from work. That would help keep kids off the street. 3) Education: Smarter adults or teens could become tutors for other children who need extra help. That would help keep children up with the rest of their class."

31 percent knew that the section of the Fourteenth Amendment stating that the government will not interfere with a person's right to life, liberty, or property without following established rules is referred to as the "due process" clause. (MC)



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46 percent understood this cartoon to meant that well funded special interest groups have priviledged access to Congress. (MC)

34 percent recognized that the meaning of this cartoon is that human beings are much more advanced in science than in their ability to get along. (MC)

31 percent recognized that an effective argument against allowing the Supreme Court to determine what a law means is that "It is dangerous to give nonelected officials such as judges so much power in the government." (MC)

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26 percent understood that the State Department is primarily responsible for carrying out United States foreign policy. (MC)

22 percent recognized that labor unions, civil rights groups, business associations, and environmental organizations all try to influence public policy and get people elected. (MC)

17 percent gave a "Complete" answer to a two-part question asking both for an argument in support of the statement that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws" and an example of the negative consequences of using civil disobedience to challenge the law. A student receiving a "Complete" score wrote "If there is a law that goes against the constitution and against your moral beliefs you shouldn't have to follow it" and "Using civil disobedience cause outbreaks or riots."

10 percent received a "Complete" score when asked "What does the cartoon say about how American government is organized?" and to explain "why American government is organized this way." The character at the left has just been asked by the aliens to "Take us to your leader." A student receiving a "Complete" score wrote that American government "is organized in different levels of power. It is organized this way because there are certain things not important enough for the president to take care of (community problems), so there are smaller levels to work on smaller problems."

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25%

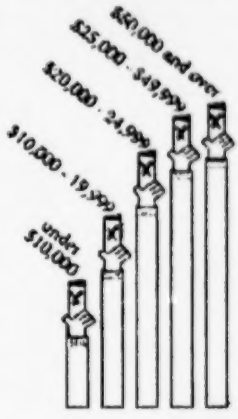
26 percent received a "Complete" score when asked "In addition to voting and being a candidate, what are two ways that citizens can be involved in presidential campaigns and elections?" A student who received a "Complete" score wrote "They may create signs and posters, etc. to help campaign for their choice. They may write editorials or media objections and concerns about a certain candidate."

21 percent knew that in a totalitarian system there are few checks on the powers of the ruler. (MC)

13 percent received a "Complete" score for giving two specific examples of how the United States Constitution limits the power of the government. A student receiving a "Complete" score wrote "1) Through separation of powers. 2) Through judicial review."

REPORTED VOTER TURNOUT BY AVERAGE INCOME, 1992

(as a percentage of voting-age population)



6 percent received a "Complete" score when asked to give a valid reason for the pattern shown in the chart. A student receiving a "Complete" score wrote "The poorer people either don't care or they think that their vote does not matter."

6 percent received a "Complete" score when asked to give two reasons why it can be useful for a country to have a constitution. A student receiving a "Complete" score wrote "1) So that we have rights and we can limit the government's power. 2) So we can control how our government is running."

0%

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For Further Information

The NAEP 1998 Civics Report Card, NCES 2000–457, is the complete report.

Civics: What Do 4th-Graders Know, and What Can They Do?, NCES 2001–460, and *Civics: What Do 12th-Graders Know, and What Can They Do?*, NCES 2001–461, are companion issues of *NAEPfacts*. Single copies are available free from ED Pubs, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, Md. 20794–1398.

The text of the Report Card, the companion *NAEPfacts*, and additional information about the Civics Assessment, including sample questions, may be obtained from the NAEP World Wide Web Home Page (see below).

The Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress. National Assessment Governing Board, Washington, DC. (1996) Copies may be obtained over the World Wide Web at **(http://www.nagb.org/pubs/civics.pdf)**

NAEPfacts briefly summarize findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The series is a product of the National Center for Education Statistics, Gary Phillips, Acting Commissioner, and Peggy Carr, Associate Commissioner for Education Assessment. This issue of *NAEPfacts* was prepared by **Carol Johnson** of NCES and **Alan Vanneman** of the Education Statistics Services Institute, based on previously published material.

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